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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies issues confronting early childhood educators who want to integrate young children with special needs with other children, and the implications of such integration for the design of outdoor play settings. The main thesis of the paper focuses on the ambiguity involved when developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education comes face to face with trends in play and playground design. It is emphasized that playground equipment needs to provide opportunities and challenges appropriate to the age and development of children. It is important to create an outdoor play setting abundant in: (1) aspects of nature; (2) furniture and shade that allow for creative and social experiences; (3) a variety of surface textures, materials, and loose parts for children to touch and manipulate; and (4) space that allows children to move around, interact with nature, socialize, and challenge their physical dexterity. It is suggested that early childhood educators assess their outdoor environment to determine whether the setting can be improved to provide a richer play experience for all children. Appended are seven references. (GLR)

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Playground Design and Mainstreaming Issues: Beyond Ramps

Paper presented at 1991 NAEYC Annual Conference

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Playground Design and Mainstreaming Issues: Beyond Ramps

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In this paper we attempt to identify some of the current issues confronting early childhood educators who want to integrate young children with special needs. Specific attention is given to the implications for the design of the outdoor play setting. Many of the issues raised may also be used to critically analyze the organization of the indoor space. The main thesis of the paper focuses on the dilemma - ambiguity which exists when developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education comes face to face with specific trends in play and playground design.

Designing for Play

Designing for play for all children, including their special needs is a relatively new challenge faced by our community. Increasingly, early childhood education programs are integrating young children with a variety of special needs. This forces us to assess whether and how the outdoor classroom accommodates and challenges the needs of all the children. This can be a difficult task as early childhood educators have rarely trained in environmental design and adaptive environments. They are thus caught in a situation of trying to do the best possible with many external and conflicting statements of good professional practice. Landscape architects, playground designers and parents find themselves in a similar situation as they too are confronted with the challenge of designing play environments for young children. Architectural principles for the design of accessible and barrier free public spaces has generated ambiguity for those working to develop sensitive mainstreaming environments for young children with special needs.

Barrier-free Design

What does the term "barrier-free-design" mean? What is an accessible playground? These terms conjure up different images of play settings for parents, teachers and playground designers. For some individuals an accessible playground is a barrier free playground in which all children move around without encountering barriers to their mobility. However, this is quite likely to yield a play structure which provides little or no play value for any of the children. More likely than not such a structure would be but a series of ramps, which would serve to bring all wheel-chair bound children up on platforms-leading nowhere but up, around and down. Building a long series of ramps to provide wheel chair accessibility is one way to interpret the term "barrier-free design". However this interpretation puts us in direct conflict with the goal of providing all children with social and physical play opportunities. Such a view of design could in fact handicap the quality of the play experiences for the children.

Accessible to all

Ramps leading up to platforms, more ramps and potentially a slide, provide few opportunities for social interaction between children. Mobile young children will spend little time on such structures, and thus the accessible ramps will have limited use. The cost of such equipment is simply not justified if the only experience is to provide ramps and inclines which already exist in the daily life experiences of children. The play value for more active and mobile children is non-existent when little or no challenge is provided, indeed, they may choose to use the equipment in such a manner that it generates risk taking for which the equipment has not been designed. Playground structures which consist of a series of ramps and platforms are an example of how a well intended concept such as "barrier-free design" was misunderstood in the design and planning of developmentally appropriate play settings for young children.

Challenges for all

Playground equipment design needs to incorporate opportunities and challenges appropriate to the age and development of children. Indeed, in many instances, the goal of the outdoor play experience should be to provide physically challenged children with ways to get out of their wheelchairs or crutches and play in safe and supportive settings. Playground equipment which provides physical support, such as a narrow staircase with railings may help provide some children the necessary support to enable them to join their friends on the playstructure. Supervision and some assistance from others may also be appropriate to enable greater levels of risk taking in physical experiences and social interaction. One thing that is clearly evident, is that inappropriately scaled, massive play equipment is not going to nurture interaction on the playground, nor is it likely to provide the therapeutic play experience so desired by the children and the early childhood educators.

How do you meet the developmental needs of children with social and psycho-motor delays or sensory impairments in the outdoor environment? The challenge of making the outdoor classroom interesting and capable of integrating young children with special needs is no easy task, and it goes beyond the issue of building playground equipment. In this respect, all the design criteria set forth for the outdoor classroom to provide a setting where nature is abundant with grass, sand, dirt, water, trees, bushes, flowers, vegetables as well as birds and insects is appropriate for children with a wide range of developmental needs. Spaces which provide for quiet contemplative activity, as well as small group interaction will certainly respond to the needs of all children at one time or another. Loose parts should also be provided in the outdoor classroom and are critical to facilitating social interaction between children. Items which are included in the definition of loose parts include wheeled toys and manipulative materials such as blocks, boards, dress up clothes and carpentry materials. Such low cost materials should be readily accessible and present in mainstreamed play settings as research has shown that developmentally challenged children are more likely to play cooperatively when toys and a variety of loose materials are available.

Creative and Social Experiences

A variety of furniture appropriately scaled and placed in the outdoor classroom facilitates movement, as well as invites all children to sit and interact with peers, adults, materials and creative arts experiences. It is important that creative arts experiences outdoors have shade so that the children are comfortable. Shade can be provided by trees, parachutes suspended between trees and posts, or in some cases by a gazebo or roof overhang from the child care centre.

There is also a need to provide a variety of surface textures and materials for children to touch, manipulate, crawl through, sit on and move around on. Grass is one natural surface material which can be accessible to most children. Sand is somewhat more limiting for movement for children experiencing difficulties moving on their own, however, it is a medium that most young children need to manipulate and interact with as part of their natural developmental experiences as well as for therapeutic reasons. In this context, water alone, or in close proximity to sand also provides a rich therapeutic experience for young developmentally challenged children. Other surfaces which provide ease of movement for wheeled toys, wagons, tricycles, wheelchairs and strollers should also be provided, but should not dominate the site. Asphalt, cement and interlocking pavers can be alternated to set the stage for activities on such hard surfaces, and in some instances children will be encouraged to paint and/or to chalk draw on the surfaces. Formal pathways may be useful if your centre provides care for several children with movement difficulties. If such is the case, low railings along a pathway which enable the children to support themselves and move along to another play area may be suitable.

Getting back to nature

Furthermore young children should be provided with adequate space to move around and interact with nature, as well as to socialize and challenge their physical dexterity. A well designed outdoor classroom is possible when the space provides children with opportunities to develop an understanding and appreciation of nature, social-communication and sharing skills, language and thinking skills, creative and imaginative ideas and sound emotional competence as well as physical dexterity. Unfortunately very few early childhood centres in North America appear to provide such a rich developmentally appropriate environment. In some cases this is due to lack of space, in other settings it is a failure to think of the outdoor space as being important to the development of the children. To provide good mainstream environments for young children, we must attempt to provide well designed and sensitively planned outdoor play settings.

Creating outdoor play experiences for young children in a mainstream setting is a challenge. Remember that all children need to have opportunities to play and explore nature, play with loose parts and experience the creative and dramatic arts. Unfortunately a recently completed survey of 349 playspaces for young children in the United States revealed that the majority of supervised early childhood playgrounds failed to provide those play areas which are the least costly to develop and which are most in tune with good early childhood curriculum practice. This is not necessarily reflective of practice in your community, nonetheless, we should be alert to the possibility

that we could all too easily overlook the obvious, when thinking of playing outdoors with all our children. So as you get ready to go out to play, take a moment to observe and assess your outdoor environment and see if there are things that you can do to improve the setting by introducing more natural materials, loose parts, play tables and textures which will provide a rich play experience for all children.

Have a good and playful year and remember that the images of our childhood create the landscapes of the future, and that "isolation and segregation handicaps all people".

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